The virtues of effective crisis leadership: What managers can learn from how women heads of state led in the first wave of COVID-19

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When life as we knew it suddenly stopped

For billions of people around the world, life as we knew it came to an abrupt halt in March 2020. Aiming to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, over 100 countries around the globe instigated lockdowns while others imposed severe and unprecedented restrictions. Normally busy streets suddenly fell quiet. In many places the eerie silence was broken only by the sound of ambulances ferrying the sick to overwhelmed hospitals, or by people singing from their balconies or standing at their front door to applaud health care workers. Never before have so many people been simultaneously gripped by fear and uncertainty.

Around the world, government leaders struggled to slow the virus's spread. Yet by April 2020 it was becoming clear that some countries were faring far better than others in dealing with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic: on a per capita basis, both cases and deaths varied greatly by nation. And as this trend continued, more and more news stories reported a common feature amongst the otherwise diverse nations that were doing the best at containing COVID-19: they were led by women.

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Distilling lessons for leading through crises

Intrigued by this, we began a systematic investigation into what women heads of state were doing that might be contributing to their relative success. Accepting that many factors influence a country's COVID-19 results, the way heads of state communicate with citizens is clearly important – and therefore worthy of careful analysis. To this end, we examined how women heads of state drew on and deployed virtues in their communication to citizens through the first wave of COVID-19. Given virtues are human qualities – not gender-specific ones – our aim was to distil lessons of relevance to *all* managers leading through crisis, regardless of gender. Of course, our hope is that showcasing examples of good leadership by women will help reduce gender-based barriers to women's advancement. But, our focus here is on the virtues we found underpinning their leadership and the lessons arising from that for all managers leading through crisis.

There are obvious differences between leading a country and managing an organisation, but there are also some significant commonalities. For example, both heads of state and organisational managers need to be able to motivate collective effort to solve shared problems, which relies on the ability to craft communications that resonate in meaningful ways. In the confusion that a crisis entails, both leaders of countries and organisations need to clearly identify and frame salient features of the situation, to help people to make sense of events and grasp the significance of what the leader proposes as priorities for action. Leaders of both countries and organisations must make timely and prudent decisions, often under conditions of ambiguity, uncertainty, risk, and pressure. As part of all this, a leader's calm, composed demeanour helps dampen down followers' anxieties. Leadership scholars who study both political and organisational crisis or change leadership, such as Keith Grint, Bert Spector and Ronald Heifetz, highlight such themes in their work. Leading a country and leading an organisation are not the same, but they have distinct commonalities. Identifying how high performing heads of state used virtues in their communication through the first wave of COVID-19 allowed us to draw out lessons for all managers leading through crisis.

Virtues and leadership

People have long been interested in the virtues that matter for good leadership. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first Western thinker to formally catalogue a list of virtues, which he held to be foundational for effective, ethical leadership and, more generally, for living a (morally) good life. In his famous *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle explained how virtues can be understood as what we would today call skills, behaviours, actions, attitudes, habits, and beliefs which are ethically meritorious in nature. Virtuous actions often give rise to instrumental benefits, but for Aristotle that is not what should drive someone to act accordingly. Rather, he believed virtue should be pursued for its *inherent goodness*, even when doing so involves hardship.

An essential point in Aristotle's argument is that our habitual ways of thinking and acting become our character. He therefore proposed that through disciplining oneself to repeatedly and routinely think and act in ways that are marked by virtue, one can form oneself into a person of good character. For him, a leader of virtuous character is one capable of exercising practical wisdom, or phronesis, which relies on the judgement to know how to enact the right virtue in the right way at the right time. A virtuous leader influences others by role-modelling ethically desirable behaviours, thereby inspiring others to improve their character too.

Following Aristotle, debate about the virtues needed for good leadership continued in ensuing centuries. In the 20th century, however, attention shifted away from leader character and virtues and towards leader traits, styles, and competencies. Instead of focusing on virtues and character, most 20th century leadership models identify techniques leaders could deploy to extract the greatest productivity and willing compliance from workers.

More recently, though, there has been a resurgence of interest in the importance of virtues and character for contemporary leadership. Much of this can be traced to the sustained crisis of corrupt and inept leadership in corporations, community organisations, and political leadership. A lack of virtue and character flaws are evidenced in examples such as Enron, Deep Water Horizon, child sex abuse by church leaders, the revelations arising from the #MeToo movement, organised doping in elite sport and many more examples of moral bankruptcy. Too often, virtue is supplanted by other supposed markers of success, such as large profits, securing appointments to powerful positions, or gathering masses of dedicated followers. Yet success measured using those markers alone – without consideration of virtue – is clearly not enough to ensure good leadership. Instead, as Aristotle argued nearly 3000 years ago, virtues and character matter.

More recently, influential scholars such as Kim Cameron, Ron Riggio, Sean Hannah, Bruce Avolio, Mary Crossan, Gerard Seijts and Jeffrey Gandz, Rick Hackett and Gordon Wang, and Joanne Ciulla advocate the importance of virtues and character for (ethically) good leadership. Virtues-based approaches to studying leadership have been encouraged by the wider positive psychology movement, pioneered by professors Christopher Peterson (deceased) and Martin Seligman, who were also among the earliest of modern scholars to research issues of virtue and character in respect of leadership. It also aligns to the greater focus being given in recent years to moral leadership, a development reviewed by scholars James Lemoine, Chad Hartnell and Hannes Leroy in their 2019 article 'Taking stock of moral approaches to leadership'.

Research on virtues and leadership shows that 'good' leadership has wider benefits beyond ethical considerations, with linkages to improved organisational harmony, stability and learning, greater employee commitment, empowerment and performance, and an improved ability to navigate change. These kinds of organisational attributes are more generally known to translate into better customer satisfaction, growth and retention, and better financial returns. In other words, there is a strong 'business case' for virtues-based leadership, in addition to its intrinsic ethical

merits. That said, the core concern of a virtues-based approach is to advance leadership that is ethically sound in its motives, means, and ends.

Virtues inform ethical leadership and encourage numerous positive outcomes in teams and organisations. Our study demonstrates that virtues also have a role to play in good crisis leadership. Not only can virtues help to prevent the crises of unethical and inept leadership, such as those mentioned earlier, we show here how they can also inform more effective and wise ways of leading through crisis. Our analysis of the ways women heads of state led through the first wave of COVID-19 provides illustrative examples that can help managers grasp how they too can express and enact virtues and better lead through crisis.

Our data set

According to the UN, there are 195 sovereign states in the world. In 2020, just 16 of these – a paltry 8% – were led by women. We were able to source English-language transcripts of national addresses given by women heads of state of 12 nations. The speeches we analyzed related to when these leaders began imposing restrictions in the face of the first wave of the pandemic in early 2020 through to when they eased back on initial restrictions. In total, our data set comprises 67 speeches delivered between 27 February and 17 June 2020 by the heads of state of listed in Table 1.

These women led nations of different sizes, whose governance arrangements, health systems, and economic prosperity vary greatly. The suite of public health measures they deployed to deal with the pandemic were not identical and some of their countries, such as Belgium, did not fare well in the first wave. For others, such as Germany, early success could not be sustained when second or third waves arose later in 2020. Our focus, though, was on discerning how these leaders drew on virtues when communicating with their people in the face of the first wave of COVID-19

and what lessons we could distil from these to help managers lead through crisis.

The virtues underpinning effective COVID-19 leadership.

As we read and re-read the speeches in our data set, our focus was on language use that aligned to a 'catalogue' of virtues developed by Toby Newstead and recently published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*. The catalogue was developed by collating virtues identified across a range of recent studies and development programmes focussed on leadership, ethics, virtues, and character, many of which continue to draw inspiration from Aristotle. A copy of this catalogue is provided at Appendix 1. By combining all those ideas into one catalogue we had a comprehensive theoretical frame and set of criteria through which we could identify the virtues that featured in the speeches.

When analyzing the speeches we looked for both direct, overt alignment with the virtues in the catalogue and for indirect, implied alignment, by way of synonyms, meaning or through identifying the virtues underpinning the actions advocated by the leaders. This method of textual analysis was modelled on Toby's approach in the above-mentioned study. We drew on the widely-used NVIVO software to help with analysing our data, allowing us to deploy both qualitative and basic quantitative ways of analysing it, such as coding which virtue selected words or phrases related to and identifying how frequently use of different virtues occurred within our coded data.

One broad finding from our study is these leaders frequently used clear, simple, direct, and heartfelt language, in marked contrast to the cooler and more impersonal norm in formal public statements by heads of state. This tonal choice cuts through the distancing effects that formality and impersonality create and helps build an emotional, values-based connection between leader and followers. These stylistic choices suggest these leaders grasped that while facts and evidence had a vital role to play in dealing with COVID-19, forging a more deeply felt, person-to-person connection with followers was also vital.

In what follows, we report, in ranked order, the top seven virtues we found the heads of state drew on directly and indirectly in their speeches. The five most emphasised virtues – humanity, justice, prudence, courage, and temperance – accounted for close to 90% of the virtue-based talk identified in our analysis, hence we explore them in depth, followed by a brief discussion of the remaining two, wisdom and transcendence. We provide illustrative examples of how virtues were given effect in the heads of state's speeches and then discuss what we pose are the logically inferred lessons for managers tasked with leading through crisis. These lessons were developed by working from our catalogue of virtues, noting our observations of how the women heads of state deployed each virtue and then extrapolating how these can be practically translated into a workplace context, along with the benefits that would logically accrue from so doing.

Table 1	Women heads of state during the first wave of COVID-19 (for whom English-language transcripts were available).
Country	**Head of State** (as of Feb – June 2020)
Barbados	Mia Amor Mottley and later, due to health issues (unrelated to COVID-19), Santia Bradshaw
Belgium	Sophie Wilmes
Finland	Sandra Marin
Georgia	Salome Zourabchvili
Germany	Angela Merkel
Iceland	Katrin Jakobsdottir
Myanmar	Aung San Suu Kyi
New Zealand	Jacinda Ardern
Norway	Erna Solberg
St Maarten	Silveria Jacobs
Taiwan	Tsai Ing-Wen
Trinidad and Tobago	Paula-Mae Weekes

The virtue of humanity

Humanity was the most frequently emphasised virtue in the speeches we studied, comprising 21% of all virtue-based messaging. The virtue of humanity involves caring for, helping, and being connected to and considerate of others. Humanity is about demonstrating and encouraging empathy, and entails kindness, love, and friendliness. Demonstrating humanity helps leaders connect with followers at a profound level such that trust is forged and followers become more willing to accept the leader's guidance.

The women heads of state we studied regularly and openly expressed humanity through demonstrations of care, concern, and empathy. They spoke of the suffering and difficulties faced by people due to COVID-19, and in doing so they demonstrated an understanding of and sensitivity to what people were going through, consistent with the virtue of humanity. They highlighted the vulnerability and interdependency of all people and emphasised the importance of everyone making the effort to care for and support others. By creating such expectations these leaders encouraged the virtue of humanity within their citizens and promoted social norms that could help in dealing with the pandemic. Illustrative examples of humanity are shown in Table 2.

How can humanity help managers lead through crisis? Demonstrating the virtue of humanity in a crisis demands an emphasis on issues of caring, concern and empathy as a key element of the overall response. Doing so matters because it makes people *feel cared for,* helping to alleviate distress through offering reassurance the manager understands and 'gives a damn' about what people are facing. Managers actually experiencing feelings of concern and empathy for people's fears and worries is also of crucial importance: those feelings help attune them to what matters to people and what employees need, generating valuable insights to guide their decisions. Leaving employees to feel neglected, uncared for, misunderstood or unimportant is clearly the opposite of what good managers should strive for, however a too-heavy emphasis on facts and evidence alone can easily give rise to this problem. Deploying the virtue of humanity helps to avoid this risk by retaining a focus on the wellbeing and needs of people.

When managers reassure employees that they care, are concerned and can empathise with what employees are facing, it builds employee confidence and trust in the manager, which in turn enhances the credibility and acceptability of the manager's decisions. Demonstrating and encouraging humanity in others promotes pro-social behaviours, thus building collective capability to address the challenges posed by the crisis, as well as helping to ensure that all people feel supported, valued and that they have a useful role to play.

Some may construe care and empathy as a sign of weakness, but it actually requires immense strength. Humanity demands managers take on the emotional toll of being fully present to others' suffering and to bear witness and offer succour for that, rather than turn away. Fostering this virtue in others is also no easy task because it involves convincing people to put aside selfish desires to focus on what others need. Despite these difficulties, it is clear that when the virtue of humanity is brought to bear a multiplicity of benefits flow to both managers and employees in coping more effectively with a crisis.

The virtue of justice

Justice was almost equally emphasised as humanity in the speeches given by women heads of state, comprising 20.5% of all virtue-based messaging compared to 21% for humanity. Justice involves everyone doing their bit, taking on a share of responsibility, recognising and feeling a sense of unity; that we are 'all in this together'. Justice entails teamwork, cooperation, civility and demonstrating commitment, and has salience to crisis situations because crises require collective effort.

When leaders demonstrate justice, it helps to motivate people to direct their energies and skills toward addressing common goals and concerns. Recognising the importance of justice, the heads of state we studied highlighted how the pandemic constituted a shared challenge and emphasised that the best chance for success required everyone to follow the rules and do their bit for the greater good. Fostering equality of sacrifice and effort, along with encouraging people to grasp that their individual actions can and would make a difference to collective well-being, were also evident in the speeches. Illustrative examples are shown in Table 3.

How can justice help managers lead through crisis? To demonstrate the virtue of justice in a crisis, managers should emphasise that all employees have an important role to play in helping the organisation survive and recover. Spelling out in practical terms the actions needed *and* how they serve the collective good is important. Crises often

Table 2	Humanity in action.
Solberg (Norway)	*It requires a lot of each one of us. We must care for each other and help each other as best we can…. The virus is so contagious that we cannot touch each other. But we must take care of each other.* (12 March 2020)
Wilmes (Belgium)	*Behind each and every statistic there are people who have lost their lives, and friends and family members who are suffering. (9 April 2020). We know it's hard, even unbearable, that we can't see our loved ones. We understand this emotional distress and we share it.* (9 May 2020)
Weekes (Trinidad and Tobago)	*Whatever your belief, empathy is paramount. Be kind, be compassionate. Where you can, assist – an elderly neighbour unable to visit the grocery or pharmacy, the disadvantaged lacking the wherewithal to access necessary supplies – and remember, all of us are our brother's and sister's keeper.* (17 March 2020)

Table 3	Justice in action.
Ardern (New Zealand)	*Everything you will all give up for the next few weeks, all of the lost contact with others, all of the isolation, and difficult time entertaining children - it will literally save lives. Thousands of lives…. The Government will do all it can to protect you. Now I'm asking you to do everything you can to protect us all. None of us can do this alone.* (23 March 2020)
Marin (Finland)	*It is important to make sure that the burden caused by this crisis is shared in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way, and that it is divided fairly between the generations.* (29 April 2020)
Bradshaw (Barbados)	*I therefore call on all Barbadians to join in this national effort to turn back the tide of COVID-19; to protect our way of life and our heritage; and to help us shepherd this country back to a place where, in the words of our National Anthem "greater will our nation grow, in strength and unity".* (1 April 2020)

comprise a series of challenging situations that unfold over time, so managers need to repeatedly demonstrate and encourage justice among employees. Being quick to praise instances of cooperative effort that demonstrates a commitment to the greater good, or any other examples of just action, is helpful. Doing this fosters an environment where the virtue of justice is a strong presence which, in turn, helps to amplify the scope and intensity of collective effort generated to address the crisis. Regularly reminding people that 'we are all in this together' and so 'everyone must do their bit' is also helpful to maintain focus on these fundamentals of justice.

To uphold justice, managers need to ensure sacrifices required of employees are borne equally by those in more powerful or privileged positions. That means, for example, if layoffs, pay cuts, longer hours or additional duties are imposed on non-managerial staff, managers should likewise face such sacrifices. Failing to do so will seriously undermine the claim that 'we are all in this together' and thus detract from the collective effort needed to address the crisis.

The virtue of prudence

Prudence was the third most emphasised virtue, comprising 17.4% of all virtue-based messaging. Prudence involves good decision-making and decisive action. It entails having the right priorities and knowing when and how to act. Prudence means understanding and actually *doing* the right or best thing and having the foresight to determine where to aim for and how to get there. Prudence combines both decisiveness and diligence, thus avoiding procrastination and indecision on the one hand and ill-considered, impulsive actions on the other. To a large extent, prudence relies on *phronesis,* or practical wisdom, which is highly relevant to leading through crises. Leaders' role model prudence by

demonstrating prompt but considered and principled responses to situations, which can help people to remain calm, clear-headed and better able to act prudently themselves.

Our analysis of the speeches women heads of state gave revealed prudence in the ways they explained how their decisions were underpinned by principles, science, evidence, and expert advice while also acknowledging that as circumstances and knowledge evolved these decisions may need to be changed. They addressed the potential risks and consequences of different courses of action, helping to secure community buy-in for decisions through sharing their reasoning. Building an understanding amongst people that the crisis was unfolding, fast-moving, complex and could not be resolved quickly is also something they spoke of, thereby helping to instil prudence in others through shaping their grasp of the situation. Illustrative examples are shown in Table 4.

How can prudence help managers lead through crisis? Demonstrating the virtue of prudence in a crisis requires firstly that managers listen to and take advice from those with relevant and credible expertise, to help in making decisions that are as well-informed as is possible under the circumstances. Understanding the nature of the crisis, the pace at which it is moving, the range of potential strategies for grappling with it, and their possible consequences, should all be subject to robust discussion with credible advisors. To do this effectively managers need to be alert to the dangers of 'groupthink', a phenomena whereby self-censoring of dissenting points of view emerges, impeding the quality of debate and decision-making. The dangers of ingratiation, whereby less powerful people tell more powerful people what they think they want to hear, is also something mangers should be alert to, along with the risk of hubristic over-confidence in their own judgement. Managers should also bear in mind that determining the pace at which one must act is amongst the most difficult of judgement

Table 4	Prudence in action.
Tsai (Taiwan)	*It takes more than fervour to govern a country. Leadership means calmly taking the right direction in a changing world.* (20 May 2020).
Zourabichvili (Georgia)	*By taking this decision, we give our country the possibility to successfully pass the difficult path, until the end of the struggle.* (4 April 2020)
Merkel (Germany)	*It would be a terrible shame if premature hope ended in suffering. Let's all remain prudent and cautious on the path to the next phase of the pandemic. We are in this for the long haul, and we cannot allow ourselves to run out of stream too soon.* (8 April 2020).

calls: both undue haste and excessive caution can be perilous and crisis decision-making inevitably involves acting with less information than is ideal. Managers should therefore give themselves permission to strive not for perfect decisions but, rather, for 'good-enough' decisions given the circumstances at hand – and to be prepared to later change those decisions if or when new information comes to light or circumstances change. In explaining decisions, managers should help others grasp that uncertainty is unavoidable, while also explaining the factors that were weighed-up in making the decision. Prudence means overcoming the temptation to throw caution to the wind or to see oneself as a heroic saviour, rather it requires careful deliberation, considering contradictory viewpoints, making justifiable decisions, and taking decisive action.

The virtue of courage

Courage was the fourth most emphasised virtue, comprising 14.3% of all virtue-based messaging. Courage pertains to doing what is right irrespective of risks, hardships, or fear. It involves bravery, determination, perseverance, resilience, and steadfastness, as well as fighting for what is right even if doing so is difficult. In the context of leadership, personally demonstrating courage can positively influence others to do the same while also instilling confidence that the leader has the strength of character needed to tackle the challenges being faced.

Courage was evidenced in the ways heads of state spoke about the many daunting problems that COVID-19 created. Importantly, though, they also emphasised and encouraged attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs that helped people find the courage needed to sustain themselves in the face of such adversity. Evincing an unwavering confidence that the difficulties posed by COVID-19 could and would be overcome was key to how these leaders used the virtue of courage to inspire people to remain hopeful, steadfast, and resilient in the face of grave dangers and sacrifice. They also conveyed faith that people would summon the courage necessary to tackle those issues, thereby building that very capacity. Illustrative examples of courage are shown in Table 5.

How can courage help managers lead through crisis? Demonstrating the virtue of courage in a crisis requires managers to openly acknowledge the challenges being faced and the concerns and fears these invoke in people.

These matters ought not be minimised, even if at first glance highlighting them might appear contrary to the normal expectation that managers motivate by focussing on positive messages. However, acknowledging serious difficulties in plain and direct terms while simultaneously demonstrating firm personal resolve and calm confidence that they can and will be addressed role models courage. Stating clearly that the situation is indeed testing also provides the foundation from which to call on others to act with courage. Asking people to be steadfast, resilient, determined, dedicated and to persevere makes no sense if the situation being faced is downplayed as a trifling concern. It is only through acknowledging the seriousness of the problem that the call to act with courage comes to make sense.

Managers should be mindful that acting with courage is a moment-by-moment choice – and that the loss of courage is an ever-present risk. Maintaining courage requires ongoing role modelling. A daily habit of encouraging and acknowledging acts of courage by others when leading through a crisis is important. Managers should also recognise that courage depends on finding what Aristotle termed the 'golden mean' – avoiding both the pitfalls of cowardice on the one hand and those of recklessness on the other.

The virtue of temperance

Temperance was the fifth most emphasised virtue, comprising 13.7% of all virtue-based messaging in the speeches we analysed. Temperance involves being disciplined, humble, patient, and dutiful. It includes being flexible, accepting, tolerant, knowing our place, and abiding by rules. A willingness to accept sacrifices and go with the flow of things beyond our control are also aspects of temperance. Temperance equips leaders to be diligent in assessing a crisis as it unfolds, which is essential to determining a wise response. The combination of discipline, flexibility, and patience that a temperate leader role models offers constructive coping strategies to others in dealing with the difficulties a crisis entails.

In the speeches we analyzed, the heads of state made it clear that no quick or easy solutions were possible and that patience was needed. They were unambiguous and unapologetic about the need for people to be disciplined and diligent in following COVID-19 related rules. They highlighted the importance of adapting to changed

Table 5	Courage in action.
Wilmes (Belgium)	*The sense of responsibility, solidarity, courage, but also the confidence in our ability to rise again, to emerge stronger from this ordeal, must drive us more than ever. (19 March 2020).* *But in spite of everything, we must persevere, more than ever. Our willpower is put to the test every day, as is our ability to cope. We have to stay strong. I believe in our ability to be together, to show solidarity when things get tough.* (5 April 2020)
Suu Kyi (Myanmar)	*Don't get filled with fear. Let us meet our challenges by uniting the strength of the people and the strength of the nation. (25 March 2020) I must acknowledge my gratitude to all medical officers, nurses and health workers, who are battling at present on the frontlines with high morale, despite difficulties and hardships. I'd say you are the heroes who are battling for the people.* (3 April 2020).
Tsai (Taiwan)	*I want to take this opportunity to tell you that the country you see is populated by kind and resilient people. No matter the difficulties we face, we can always count on our democracy, our solidarity, and our sense of responsibility towards each other to help us overcome challenges, weather difficult times, and stand steadfast in the world.* (20 May 2020)

circumstances despite the sacrifices involved, thereby fostering temperance amongst their community. Illustrative examples are shown in Table 6.

How can temperance help managers lead through crisis? To demonstrate temperance in a crisis, managers must adopt a calm and disciplined approach to understanding the nature, cause, effects and potential ways of addressing the crisis. Managers should humbly consider the scope of their own knowledge and skills, demonstrate rule-following behaviour themselves, and remind people of the importance of duty and patience. Adopting a considered, temperate approach can be challenging because in times of crisis the temptation for managers is to immediately leap to action, or to be overly reliant on a command-and-control approach. However, demonstrating disciplined consideration of the situation enhances the quality of decisions made. This, along with being temperate of mood and manner, helps employees adopt a temperate grasp of the situation and respond in a constructive way. In situations where a crisis involves an extended period of disruption to normal routines, and therefore demands sustained discipline, patience, sacrifice, flexibility, and acceptance of the upheaval, it is especially vital that managers personally role model the specific actions they are asking of others or else risk losing all trust and credibility. Managers also need to display a patient but resolute stance when people struggle with the difficulties the crisis creates. This may involve constant reinforcement of the key behaviours being sought, along with reminding people why they matter.

The virtues of wisdom and transcendence

The virtues discussed thus far – humanity, justice, prudence, courage and temperance – collectively comprise 87% of the virtue-based talk we identified in the speeches. Two further virtues – wisdom (7.5%) and transcendence (5.4%) – accounted for the balance, hence we provide just a brief discussion of each here.

Wisdom pertains to acquiring and sharing knowledge, building understanding, being curious, learning, and striving to make sense of complexity. It enables perspective and the formation of sound judgement. Transcendence is about meaning and purpose. It is about connecting to the intangible, such as ancestry, history, a sense of God, spirituality, or faith. It entails a sense of thankfulness and joy for what we do have, along with hope to inspire us to strive for a better future.

Wisdom is implied in the ways women heads of state quickly learned and gained understanding about the best ways to manage the first wave of COVID-19. However, the speeches we analyzed, which were given between 27 February and 17 June 2020, placed much greater emphasis on prompt, decisive decisions (prudence) than unrushed deliberation and curiosity (wisdom), reflecting, we think, the intensity of the crisis at this time. Similarly, there were mentions of transcendence, but the need to care for other people in the here-and-now (humanity) was also given more emphasis than taking the time to commune with one's creator or to seek meaning and purpose (transcendence). The limited emphasis on transcendence may also stem from the secularism that features in many countries. Wisdom and transcendence do have an important role to play in nurturing a leader's learning and curiosity (wisdom) and sustaining a leader's meaning, purpose, and connection to the intangible (transcendence). However, our data suggests that in the early or most intensive stages of a crisis, these two virtues are likely less of a priority, with more focus going to the action-oriented virtues of humanity, justice, prudence, courage, and temperance. Illustrative examples of wisdom and temperance are shown in Table 7.

What can wisdom and transcendence teach managers about leading through crisis? For managers, the value of wisdom and transcendence in grappling with a crisis is clear: the former is central to enabling learning, adaptation and promoting good decision-making while the latter provides sources of inspiration to help us rise above the difficulties we face and not fall prey to despair. Coupled with the other virtues, the potential for managers to steer the best possible course through a difficult situation is enhanced when they draw on these virtues to guide their efforts.

Virtues-based crisis leadership: Key lessons for managers

There is no single best-practice formula to lead through crisis. But there are a number of good-practices rooted in virtues, as evidenced by the women heads of state we studied. Table 8 summarises the practical lessons for

Table 6	Temperance in action.
Markel (Germany)	*Our success will also largely depend on how disciplined each and every one of us is in following the rules. It is up to each and every one of us to do so, without any exception.* (18 March 2020) *We must not let our attention stray for even one second and must bear in mind that we are still at the very beginning of the pandemic; this is the beginning, and we are a long way from being in the clear. I will not grow tired of pointing out and urging time and again that we must remain consistent and disciplined.* (7 April 2020)
Ardern (New Zealand)	*… success won't be instant. The benefit of what we do today, won't be felt for many days to come. Expect our numbers to keep rising, because they will. But over time, we will see change if we all stick to the rules.* (25 March 2020).
Bradshaw (Barbados)	*Barbadians, residents, let me reiterate that there is no perfect formula for confronting the challenges that this pandemic has presented. We will all have as a nation to adjust our behaviour and our policies and practices and the regulations as the situation unfolds.* (7 April 2020)

Table 7 Wisdom in action.

Marin (Finland)	*When mistakes are made, we must study them and learn from them.* (29 April 2020)
Suu Kyi (Myanmar)	*Don't be submerged in ignorance. Instead, people should study the official announcements; do not get onto false path by listening to rumours. We can overcome the Covid-19 problems with mindfulness, relentless effort and wisdom.* (25 March 2020)
Transcendence in action	
Jacobsdottir (Iceland)	*No one knows if or how the world will change after the corona virus. But some will not change. We will continue to be human, we will continue to yearn and love, remember and miss, rejoice and grieve. Shocks like this are sometimes like a mirror that shows what people are doing and what matters in life.* (3 May 2020)
Solberg (Norway)	*These days have shown what lives in us.* (7 April 2020)

managers leading through crisis identified in our preceding discussion. These practices offer managers useful techniques for leading through crisis and, more profoundly, they help instil virtues-based habits which, according to Aristotle, come to give shape to our very character. Infusing virtues-based practices into crisis leadership thus offers long term and potentially transformative benefits to all who use them or are influenced by their use. We note, also, that

Table 8 Key virtue-based crisis leadership lessons for managers.

Virtue	Key lessons for managers
Humanity	• Focus your attention on human needs and wellbeing to alleviate the distress that crises generate • Demonstrate you care and understand fully what people are going through • Set the expectation that people should be supportive towards others, thereby boosting their ability to cope with the crisis • Use your empathetic sense of what matters to people to guide decision-making and actions to deal with the crisis
Justice	• Consistently reinforce we are all in facing this crisis together, and that everyone has a role to play • Make clear what each person can do to help address the crisis and why their contributions matter • Be quick to praise examples of just behaviours that contribute to addressing the crisis • Ensure sacrifices and burdens related to the crisis are distributed equitably
Prudence	• Seek expert advice and foster open, robust debate of the options available to deal with the crisis • Be alert to the dangers of groupthink, ingratiation, and hubris to ensure sound decision-making prevails • Aim for 'good enough' decisions made in a timely fashion – and then adapt them as the crisis unfold or new information emerges • Explain the reasoning behind decisions and help others to accept uncertainty is unavoidable in crisis situations
Courage	• Openly acknowledge the crisis in plain and direct terms • Demonstrate a calm confidence and resolve when discussing the crisis • Regularly solicit and acknowledge acts of courage by others in tackling the crisis • Calibrate and temper your own and others' impulses to avoid both cowardice and recklessness in facing the crisis and instead occupy the 'golden mean' where courage lies
Temperance	• Be diligent and disciplined in understanding the nature of the crisis and the options available, ensuring your key messages reflect the insights gained • Adhere to and role model the specific actions to deal with the crisis that are being asked of others, thereby demonstrating humility, discipline, duty, sacrifice and rule following • Constantly emphasise the key behaviours expected of people and why they matter in overcoming the crisis
Wisdom	• Foster constant learning and adaptation as the crisis unfolds • Role model curiosity and critical thinking about the crisis and how to deal with it and encourage this in others • Look for recurring patterns in information and events as the crisis unfolds to aid sense-making and crystallise complexity • Take a wide lens view of the crisis to gain perspective • Carefully weigh up information and options to help make sound decisions about how to deal with the crisis
Transcendence	• Seek out and share possible lessons from past crises that can help provide guidance for current difficulties • Remind people of the meaning and purpose of their actions and the collective effort being deployed to address the crisis • Demonstrate appreciation for the efforts that people are making to deal with the crisis • Ward off hopelessness and despair through demonstrating reasoned, grounded hopefulness in our shared capacity to address the crisis to the best of our abilities

some of these practices may help to prevent crises from emerging and, in more settled circumstances, to foster virtues-based leadership.

Conclusion

Nearly a year down the track and the Lowy Institute's ranking of 98 countries pandemic performance, issued in January 2021, offered validation that women heads of state on average performed extremely well. Its data did not include Barbados, Sint Maarten or Trinidad and Tobago. However, the averaged ranking it gave to the remaining nine counties whose leaders we studied was 25 out of 98. All but two of those nine were in the top third. Three were in the top ten, with New Zealand in first place, Taiwan third and Iceland seventh.

That said, sustaining a successful response to a crisis as complex as COVID-19 is far from guaranteed, even if the initial response was effective. Many of the countries led by these women have, as elsewhere, seen repeated instances of COVID-19 cases spiralling out of control, straining health systems, wreaking further economic havoc and resulting in repeated lockdowns. Active resistance, whether rooted in belief in conspiracy theories, economic desperation, or just sheer fatigue with the loss of normal life, have sorely tested these (and other) leaders' capacity to rally their people to remain united and committed in the battle with COVID-19. The emergence of more infectious variants of the coronavirus, such as the Omicron strain, has made containing the virus ever more difficult. This helps to highlight that a multiplicity of factors beyond the leader's virtues shape the results a nation achieves in dealing with COVID-19 and that no matter how good, leadership does not constitute a silver bullet.

A final, but important point to note is that none of the leaders relied on one virtue alone. This suggests that demonstrating humanity or prudence or justice *only* is not enough to lead through crisis. Each virtue has a role to play in successfully leading through crisis, and it is the judicious combination of a range of virtues that really matters for effective leadership. Humanity reminds us that we are all connected, and that each other's wellbeing is of paramount concern. Justice reminds us that we all have a part to play. Prudence reminds us to listen to diverse perspectives and make reasoned, justifiable decisions. Courage reminds us to take the right action, even if it is risky. Temperance reminds us to remain patient and dutiful. Wisdom reminds us to remain curious and continually learn. And transcendence reminds us of where we come from, where we are going, and the broader meaning and purpose to our efforts.

As the pandemic continues to unfold and pose novel, complex challenges for heads of state and organisational managers around the globe, we encourage all managers to practice the virtues that might help better navigate this and other crises. Adopting virtue-based strategies cannot alone guarantee success, nor ward off future crises, but at the very least adopting such approaches helps us all to refine and develop our character such that we may cope more ethically and wisely with such challenges.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Suze Wilson: Conceptualization, Writing – original and revised draft, **Toby Newstead:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Declarations of interest

None.

Appendix 1

Virtues Catalogue		
Virtue	Definition (s)	Associated characteristics and attributes
Courage	A character trait enabling leaders to do without fear what they believe is "right" (Wang & Hackett, 2015) Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29) Working with fear to do the right thing…leaders act with fortitude when they persevere in the face of adversity (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010)	Fortitude, bravery, daring, valour, persistence, integrity, perseverance, zest, industriousness, vigour, authenticity, truthfulness, honesty, vitality, enthusiasm, energy, resilience
Humanity	A character trait underlying leaders' love, care, and respect of others (Wang & Hackett, 2015) Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29)	Love, kindness, care, generosity, nurturance, compassion, altruistic love, niceness, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, personal intelligence, empathy, helping/helpfulness

Justice	A character trait motivating respectful recognition and protection of rights of others to be treated fairly, in accordance with uniform and objective standards (Wang & Hackett, 2015) A sustained or constant willingness to give others what they deserve (Riggio et al., 2010) Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30)	Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, accountability, fairness, teamwork, leadership autonomy, dignity, respect
Prudence	A character trait enabling leaders to make 'right'' judgments and choose the ''right'' means to achieve the ''right'' goals (Wang & Hackett, 2015) Associated with knowledge, practical wisdom, and insight… the ability to decide, based on experience, the right thing to do.(Riggio et al., 2010)	Practical wisdom, insight, decisiveness understanding, detachment, judgement
Temperance	A character trait helping leaders control their emotional reactions and desires for self-gratification (Wang & Hackett, 2015) The ability to control one's emotions (Riggio et al., 2010) Strengths that protect against excess (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30)	Moderation, patience, forgiveness, mercy, humility, modesty, self-control, self-regulation, honesty
Transcendence	Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 30)	Appreciation of beauty, excellence, awe, hope, wonder, elevation, gratitude, optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation, humour, playfulness, spirituality, purpose, religiousness, faith, meaningfulness
Wisdom	Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29)	Creativity, originality, ingenuity, curiosity, interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience, open-mindedness, judgement, critical thinking, love of learning, perspective

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